THE SHIP FROM YUCATAN

By Miss *CARRA CALSTOCK*

PART 4: THE GARDENS OF STEAD MANOR

24th June 1841.

I could not truly recollect a waking hour spent without Catrina. Since our meeting, we had fast become inseparable. Catrina enjoyed greatly the clear days, and often went out without a parasol to shield her from the sunlight. The rays seemed to sooth her into a languor that rivalled even the worst throes of my ague. During some of these spells, her relaxation would grow so profound that she would drape herself across garden furniture or, to my initial shock and shyness, me. I thought at first to make protest, though never did; once through the initial surprise, it was wholly pleasant. Catrina, either a quickling of light body or else possessed of great poise and grace, seemed barely a weight at all. Her scent was curious, and had remained an unending fascination despite the passing weeks. Curious is not, of course, to say unpleasant – Catrina carried a delightful aroma, not dissimilar to the scent of pine, with an accompanying element that I couldn't name, but recalled me of some of the incense burned often by Madame L'Ombre. It instilled in me such bliss and comfort that I would find myself a-flutter on clear days, that I might enjoy the sweet near-sleep once more.

On other days, those in the calm hinterland between rain-marred and numbing heat, Catrina and I would walk the gardens. I would share what I knew of the varieties I knew of English flowers that grew on our grounds, and Catrina would repeat the names back to me in her lilting voice, in tones which always seemed on the edge of rapture.

'Chrys-an-the-mum,' she sounded out slowly, tongue hovering behind teeth towards the end of the word. Her eyes darted downwards, then returned to my face. Expectant, as dark and warm as wood embers.

I nodded encouragement, delighted myself as her smile spread, showing teeth like pearls against the deep olive tones of her face.

Thus we followed arm in arm along the verge. My left arm linked with Catrina's, my right bearing my parasol, I felt as the Venus de Milo must - divested of arms, and quite lovely. The loveliness was particular to Catrina's presence, it seemed to radiate from her and flow into me. Her lightness of step and manner seemed to well suit my oft leaden limbs and fits of melancholy, as though the part of myself that had been taken by my illness was found in her.

Presently, Catrina paused in our ambling to ask of me, 'Miss Briar, is it not true that you are named for a flower?'

'A plant,' I said, then ruefully, 'a horrible thorny one, at that.'

'My Briar is surely not horrible or thorny,' she moved as if reeling slowly, a step and a half turn that brought us face to face. 'More so - thorns need not detract from the beauty of a bloom. Have you not roses in this garden?'

She then dubbed me her rose, which caused me to flush near as deep a red as my floral counterpart.

It may have been a product of my childhood isolation, but this felt improper - impious almost - which sparked shame when Father and Ms Ida happened upon us thus in repose. Though the only comment passed was of how well it was that Catrina and I had bonded so, I still felt, in the pit of myself, an unworthiness.

I ask, dear reader, is it usual to feel shame for what one wants?

Of my father, his visit was a scant few days. Business, of course, calls loud and calls often, but I fear the longer my frailty withstands the ministrations of medicine, the harder he may find it to be in my presence. I of course bear no ungracious thoughts to this - were I in his position, I too may baulk at the weakness my offspring represented. I want so badly to not be a burden.

Ms Ida tells me that this is a mere figment preying upon me, that of course Father loves me, and I am no burden to him, and yet there are times, pieces of expression and speech during our interactions where I can't help but feel as a millstone placed upon him.

Given the brevity of our association, perhaps it was remiss of me to confide my misgivings to Catrina, but something in her bearing called out to something deep within me, that here was one with whom secrets can - nay, should - be shared. Perhaps this is simply the way of friendship between peers, a situation my condition had exiled me from until now.

I took great pains to keep my voice steady as I related my concerns to her, but I bade Catrina brush my hair – an act that we both enjoyed greatly – while I did. My reasons for this were twofold: Catrina's gaze would be elsewhere, so she would miss any trace of anguish in my visage, but also that I found the sensation soothing, that gentle hands through my flowing locks might assist me in maintaining composure.

Catrina pressed me not, merely making small sounds when I paused, acknowledging that she heard me, that she listened and understood.

When I had finished what felt like the full list of my dreads – I seemed quite unable to cease sharing with our guest, she must think me a terrible bore! – Catrina gently pulled me backwards until I was reclined against her. I felt my head come to rest against her shoulder as her arms encircled me, a sensation not unlike being cradled as a child.

My worries, dissolved on the evening breeze, permitted entrance via a window kept ajar that we might enjoy the air. I allowed weariness to enfold and blanket me while Catrina recounted tales from her homeland. I fear I was too drowsed to recall them in detail, but they spoke of wonders; humming birds, trees so grand as to support houses, twin warrior princes, and the ferocious jag-war. Strange tales, undoubtedly folk tales, much like the ones of Europe that I revel in so. Also, though doubtless there was great wisdom and meaning imparted therein, so advanced was my state of relief and relaxation that I was unable to parse it.

I surfaced somewhat from my drowse to hear Catrina tell of her home, and how she came to leave the new world. She recounted some of her childhood, that she had been born of a union between a Spaniard and a native woman. How her father, a sailor by vocation, had left Yucatan and that when she grew older she thought to find him and travelled herself to the Port de la Desconacida, where she took what work a woman could in order to secure passage across the Atlantic aboard a schooner. As a lifelong Torstow local, I had seen sailing ships for as long as I could think back, but to hear the wonder with which Catrina described such vessels made me think of them anew.

Alas, her ship had wrecked, and it was to England, not Spain, that she escaped the clutches of the briney abyss.

'But you see, Miss Briar, through all of this, to struggle on has afforded me such an intriguing and wondrous friend as you.'

Oh, dear reader, my heart leapt in such a way that I feared it may burst from my chest.

'And surely,' Catrina continued, 'if your presence is enough to counteract these hardships, your father must share this view. You are a delight, and I'll not hear otherwise.'

My desire - my compulsion, almost - to share myself with Catrina overwhelmed the secretive nature that I had grown around my medallion. I told Catrina of it, of how I came by it, and how in my thoughts her and it were inextricably linked. What I held back from saying was that Valdez may also have been a part of this link, and that this had festered to a deep and abiding fear that

upon learning this she may leave, and that I knew not why this fear gnawed at me so. Of this I am certain: some things, even between friends, must remain unsaid.

This was, of course, unfounded - Catrina told me that she had no knowledge of any man by the name Valdez.

I told her that I would show her the medallion, but tomorrow. Ensconced as I was in her embrace, which seemed to grow tighter the longer I remained there. I felt such comfort that the thought of retiring to my bed seemed akin to the prospect of spending the night upon paving slabs. 'Dear Catrina,' I spoke softly as I allowed the weight of my heavy head to fall more upon her encircling arm, her hand supporting gently at my neck. 'I could rest like this forever.'

As I slipped back into a doze, and further towards the black infinite of sleep, I thought I heard amusement flicker through Catrina's voice: '... forever?'

END OF PART FOUR
